



# Caribbean Cat

The new El Taj delivers beauty and value to Mexico's  
Playa del Carmen.

BY MICHAEL MCCARTHY



**D**espite what some may tell you, Playa del Carmen is far from the sleepy fishing village it was 15 years ago. Sure, the place is still small enough to walk from end to end in the time it takes to down a chilly Dos Equis, and you can still watch brightly colored fishing boats offload the day's catch behind the beach shack where you're nibbling grouper tacos. But its famous Fifth Avenue bustles with Europeans, Canadians, Mexico City's trend seekers and, yes, Americans. You can pick out the latter: They have smug looks on their faces, since they've broken away from the crowds of Cancun an hour to the north and discovered this lovely hamlet that nestles against the Caribbean.

So, yes, docility isn't the watchword around here, and for good reason.

Playa feels like old-school fun for adults who aren't into dancing on bars (though I saw a few on Fifth Avenue), families that want an all-inclusive alternative and friends who yearn for a long weekend to chill, snorkel the reefs or explore the region's absurdly sublime topography.

Amid the bustle of Playa, some of the hotels are a patchwork of quick development to put "heads in beds," in the industry vernacular. Some developers, however, got everything right, including those behind the just-opened **El Taj Oceanfront** (866/479-2738; [condohotelsplayadelcarmen.com](http://condohotelsplayadelcarmen.com); rates from \$275).

El Taj is part of a family of Playa condohotels that are big on amenities and resemble mini-villages. "My No. 1 design goal is beauty," says Sergio Segura, the Mexican-born architect who created the property—an aesthetic mix of Balinese

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# walk



cup of tea.” So Perlman asked a local where he could find semi-deserted beaches and a small-town vibe. He was directed to Cozumel, but was told he’d have to first catch a ferry to the island from a hardscrabble fishing village called Playa del Carmen. He missed the ferry, but it changed the direction of his life. “I saw nothing but potential in Playa, so I took a chance and bought land.” Yes, that was only 17 years ago—and Perlman helped reshape the town, including building a firehouse in nearby Tulum and setting the direction of smart development in Playa.

“We want to keep this place pristine,” he says. “The appeal is its vibe, and the fact that it’s not Cancun—we have something special here.” And Perlman’s proudest achievement, El Taj, proves it.



## GETTING THERE

Daily nonstop flights on Mexicana Airlines and United Airlines to Cancún from Washington Dulles International Airport.

resorts and catwalk curves reminiscent of Antoni Gaudí’s work in Barcelona. The result is what I call a micro-resort, a venue that’s at once very much a part of Playa’s vibrant street scene, but also tucked away from revelers when you simply want to relish the sun next to private infinity pools or decompress in a hot tub overlooking the surf.

Then, of course, there’s the convenience factor. El Taj and its sister properties (Porta Playa, Villas Sacbe, Maya Villa) are within one block of each other and offer the services of a hotel, including a concierge who

will book adventures for you throughout Riviera Maya, with the perks of a condo. One-, two- and three-bedroom condos come with gourmet kitchens and enough indoor and outdoor living space to host a crowd.

Jack Perlman, a gregarious New Yorker, is the man behind the properties. When I ask the developer about his odyssey of landing in Playa, he laughs and says it’s like every other wild tale south of the border: pure accident. “I had vacationed in Cancun for years, but when I returned in 1993, the place had changed—it wasn’t my